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Social Construction in *Les Miserables*: A Look at Jean Valjean's Identity Formation in the
Context of Symbolic Interactionism's Labeling Theory

By

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Social Construction in *Les Misérables*: A Look at Jean Valjean's Identity Formation in the
Context of Symbolic Interactionism's Labeling Theory

Jean Valjean, the protagonist of Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*, has fascinated casual readers and critics alike for almost one hundred and fifty years. Valjean's story is heart wrenching yet suspenseful, entertaining yet educational. When critics look at Valjean, however, by force of habit they ask, "What is Hugo trying to say through his characterization of Valjean?" Considering the many readings critics have proposed to explain Valjean's significance, Hugo's decision to relate Valjean to the hundred headed hydra seems appropriate. Critics arrive at these different readings of Valjean as a result of the varied lenses through which they choose to view him.

For instance, John Gale and Laurence Porter look at Valjean through the lens of history. Both critics argue that Hugo's use of the year 1815 links Valjean to Napoleon Bonaparte (Gale 65; Porter 129). In Gale's opinion, Napoleon symbolizes the political regimes that dominated a significant portion of French society to the detriment of the lower classes whereas Valjean symbolizes both the lower class whose suffering is linked to the rise of the political regimes and the social movements Hugo hopes will dominate future French society (72-3). In contrast, Porter sees Napoleon as simply symbolizing his own empire while Valjean symbolizes the French people oppressed by Napoleon. Both Gale and Porter note that the year 1815 is significant for its simultaneous reference to Napoleon's final defeat and Valjean's release from prison (Gale 69; Porter 129), and Gale further points out that in the year 1815, Valjean begins his ascension to a moral greatness comparable to the political greatness from which Napoleon has just fallen. Under Gale's reading then, Valjean serves as a symbol of hope for the lower classes and future

French society (73), and under Porter's reading, Valjean serves as a symbol of French freedom (129).

Taking another tack, Karen Masters-Wicks prefers to view Jean Valjean through lens of language. In her opinion society can be classified according to its dialect. The middle and upper classes speak the dialect of the sublime (88) which is characterized by "responsibility and sacrifice" (107). The lower classes speak the dialect of slang which allows them to communicate to society their dissatisfaction with oppression but carries the drawback of dehumanizing its speakers through its composition of conflicting voices which cause the speaker's sense of self to fracture (88-9; 91-2). Jean Valjean has the dialect of slang branded indelibly into his identity while a prisoner (99, 107). He tries to reject that dialect of slang in favor of the dialect of the sublime after he leaves prison, but he is always torn because his actions necessitate his denying a part of his soul (99-100, 107). When he admits at the Champmathieu trial that he is Jean Valjean, he joins within his identity the discourses of slang and the sublime (100, 107), providing an example to society of the good that may be achieved by making the power of the lower classes to speak equal with the power that the upper classes enjoy (107-08).

Alfred Cismaru carries the exploration of Valjean's character still further, choosing to examine him through the lens of scientific determinism. In Cismaru's opinion, Valjean demonstrates the helplessness of the lower classes to be anything but brutish. Valjean is a product of his environment, and as such, he serves as a vehicle by which Hugo advocates for a drastic change in the social conditions of the lower classes. Such changes should allow people to escape the "prey to predator" evolutionary cycle of the poor, and "socially determine" people for better lives than the current system allows (57).

This final lens of scientific determinism has much to argue in its favor, for clear signs of scientific determinism's influence appear in both *Les Miserables* and other writings by Hugo (Cismaru 56). Yet while Cismaru is right in arguing that Hugo, in *Les Miserables*, presents an understanding of the individual as a product of social construction, he does not delve deeply into the processes by which that construction takes place. In the character of Jean Valjean, however, Hugo gives a detailed picture of one particular process of social construction. By applying the sociological concepts contained in symbolic interactionism's labeling theory¹, it is clear to see society's role in shaping Jean Valjean into Provider, Criminal, and Good-Honest Man.

It is only fair to note that Hugo would never have expected his readers to apply labeling theory to his protagonist. Neither the parent theory of symbolic interactionism nor the labeling subtheory had been formulated during Hugo's time. However, both Hugo and the sociologists who created symbolic interactionism and labeling theory had the same goal in relation to their work; therefore their work is quite naturally related. Sociology attempts to explain how people function in relation to others around them. Hugo, although influenced heavily by Romantic thinking in his earlier years, was at the writing of *Les Miserables*, becoming ever more influenced by Realism, a literary movement which endeavors to accurately portray human nature, psychology, and society. Although labeling theory had not been formulated when Victor Hugo wrote *Les Miserables*, then, the concepts set forth in this theory, and in the larger parent theory of symbolic interactionism, provide a valid basis for examining how Jean Valjean comes to assume the roles of Provider, Criminal, and Good-Honest Man.

¹ Terms describing individual concepts or relating to other subtheories of symbolic interactionism not developed by labeling theorists are occasionally used throughout this paper to provide a coherent understanding of labeling theory and its implications for Jean Valjean. George Herbert Meade, Charles Horton Cooley, and Herbert Blumer are recognized as two of the men most responsible for the creation of symbolic interactionism, but there are many others who have developed subtheories or concepts contained under the umbrella of symbolic interactionism. All terms used in this paper are considered common knowledge to those familiar with symbolic interactionism, and therefore no effort will be made to trace such terms or concepts to their originators.

Before looking at how labeling theory illuminates Valjean's function as an illustration of society's power to construct the individual, it might be helpful to briefly look at the basic premises of labeling theory. Simply put, labeling theory, attempts to explain how society influences people to accept certain roles and identities. It proposes that people often assume roles and identities that correspond with labels given by either society in general or an individual held in high regard who is known as a significant other. Through a fairly fluid, but clearly discernable process, people are labeled and then gradually persuaded by society to accept the identity or role with which they have been labeled.

²The first step in this process occurs when society or an individual labels a person. Often the label is based on a factual assessment of a person's attitude, actions, or aptitude such as when a preschooler is labeled Good Hitter by her peers when she connects with the ball three times during a tee ball game. Sometimes, however, the label is based on social prejudices such as when a homeless woman is labeled Prostitute or Drug Addict. At other times labels result from social expectations such as when a poor, American frontier girl who got married in the seventeen hundreds was labeled Homemaker. Labels need not take the form of expressly designated terms. They may be unspoken, or they may take the form of a variety of terms which all add up to the same general idea. The spirit of the label, however, will be unmistakable.

Once the label has been applied, the second phase of the labeling process begins—people react to the labeled individual on the basis of the label. This reaction may come from the person or social group doing the labeling or from a person or social group to whom the label has been communicated. Whatever the case, in this second stage of the labeling process, the person being

² The general outline of labeling theory presented here is based on a chart made into an overhead in 2004 by Wadsworth, a division of Thompson Learning, Inc. as part of a packet of ancillary materials given to teachers using the fifth edition of Joan Ferrante's *Sociology: A Global Perspective*, a text published by Wadsworth in 2003. The chart was adapted from information given by Shelley E. Taylor, Letitia Ann Peplau and David O. Sears in the tenth edition of their book *Social Psychology*, published by Prentice Hall in 2002.

labeled will be treated by others according to the perceptions and prejudices others hold in regard to the label. For instance, people may be slower to express anger toward a man reputed to have a violent anger problem than toward a man without that label. Those people may have personally witnessed the violent tendency of this man or his tendency may have been rumored to them by others, but the result is that they will modify their behavior in accordance with the man's label.

The third phase of the labeling process involves the labeled person responding to society's treatment. This response may be positive or negative. A positive response might be illustrated by a girl whose peers tell her she is beautiful taking extra care with her hair and clothing and consequently looking even more beautiful in her friends' eyes. A negative response might be illustrated by a person who is labeled chronically angry becoming angry when she tries to convince her therapist that such a label is ridiculous.

In the fourth stage of the process, society will, based on the labeled person's behavior, determine that the label is accurate and respond to the labeled person on the basis of the label, finally causing the labeled person in the fifth stage of the process to internalize the assigned role or identity. It is not inevitable that individuals should internalize the label. Symbolic interactionism states that it is quite possible for one to resist messages given by secondary social groups when receiving reinforcement of opposing messages from one's primary social group or from individual significant others such as parents, mentors, close friends, or one's spouse. Resisting by one's self the messages that lead to internalization of a label, however, is next to impossible.

Even so, it is important to understand that labeling theory endeavors to explain only one of the many processes by which society constructs the individual. In *Les Misérables*, Hugo's protagonist, Jean Valjean, is undoubtedly the product of a variety of internal and external

influences. No theory, unassisted, could account for the entirety of his thoughts and behavior. That said, labeling theory does provide a useful lens by which readers may view Valjean's progression from Provider; to Criminal; to Good-Honest Man.

For instance, the first fully fleshed out label that Valjean internalizes is Provider. Hugo does not spend much time on Valjean's early life, so it is unclear whether society in general or Valjean's sister most influences the label's assignment. However, the label's assignment cannot be mistaken. It is clear from the text that the label is not assigned on the basis of Valjean's actions, attitude, or aptitude but rather is the result of a social expectation. Hugo reveals that the death of Valjean's parents in his early boyhood results in the situation where his "sister had brought up Jean Valjean, and as long as her husband lived, she had taken care of her younger brother" (Hugo 83). When Valjean is twenty-five, however, his sister's husband dies and leaves her with seven small children to feed and take care of, "the eldest of these children at eight, the youngest, one year old" (83). Because his sister raised him, Valjean is under social obligation to become Provider. Hugo verifies that Valjean is labeled through socialization to recognize obligation when he writes: "Taking the father's place, [Valjean] supported the sister who had reared him" (83). Regardless, then, of whether Valjean's sister or society in general is the chief agent of socialization and therefore labeling, it is completely clear to Valjean that he has been labeled Provider.

With the Provider label, the stage in which either general society or a significant other treats the individual in accordance with the label is even more ambiguous than the initial labeling stage. In contrast to the specific details provided in Valjean's later labelings explaining social reaction to labels, it is unclear in this Provider labeling how society or Valjean's sister specifically interact with him on the basis of his label. Hugo relates that when beginning to take

on the Provider functions, Valjean “did it naturally, as a duty, but with a trace of surliness” (83), indicating that he probably received no verbalized prompting to begin enacting the Provider role. Because the label is communicated through socialization, it is likely that society did, however, act in some way on its expectations that Valjean no longer be Dependant but Provider. Socialization is largely invisible, and accordingly, Hugo does not document its presence. But potentially indicating that acts of socialization continue after the labeling, Hugo notes that when Valjean begins functioning as Provider he does so “with a trace of surliness” suggesting that though he has not specifically been told he must be provider, it is not something he inherently desires to do. The role of Provider, then, is something others have obligated him to perform, and because socialization never pauses, it is likely that society did respond to Valjean on the basis of his label.

As a result of Valjean’s feeling of obligation, he begins functioning as Provider. Hugo says Valjean’s “youth was spent in rough and poorly paid labor, he was never known to have a sweetheart; he had no time to be in love” (83). It is important to note, however, that his functioning as Provider does not mean he has internalized the label, or identity, of Provider. He has been made to feel obligated, and his hard work is simply a reaction to that obligation, as is evidenced by Hugo’s statement that Valjean takes the role “as a duty” (83).

Yet based on Valjean’s functioning as Provider, his sister’s belief in the label is reinforced, and she consequently continues to treat him as Provider. Her reinforced belief in Valjean’s label is demonstrated at the dinner table. Hugo writes, “When [Valjean] was eating, his sister, Mother Jeanne, frequently took out of his bowl the best of his meal—a bit of meat, a slice of bacon, the heart of the cabbage—to give to one of her children” (83). Hugo does not reveal whether Mother Jeanne takes this action out of desperation over her children’s poor diet or out of

anger that Valjean has not provided better. In any case, Mother Jeanne's actions reveal to both Valjean and Hugo's readers that she sees Valjean as Provider, for when looking for food to give her children, Mother Jeanne comes to him.

As a result of the accumulation of messages Valjean gets through the labeling process, he eventually internalizes the Provider label. Undoubtedly, this internalization is a process, but that he does completely internalize the label is indisputably attested to by his decision to commit a crime when he realizes that he cannot provide for his sister's family by honest means. This internalization can be clearly separated from his non-internalized functioning as Provider by noting that his criminal activity exceeds social obligation. Society's labeling of Valjean only obligates him to work as hard as he possibly can for his family. Yet there is no obligation beyond that point. It would be tragic if a family member starved because Valjean could not provide, but as long as he has worked as hard as he can, he cannot rationally be blamed by his sister or society. He will simply be a poor, honest man visited by misfortune. His decision to commit burglary in an effort to provide food for his family shows that he is not trying to simply fulfill an obligation anymore. He has assumed in his soul the identity of Provider, and he can make no excuse to himself for failure. In contrast to the response of sympathy that he would receive if someone under his care starved despite his honest and persistent efforts to provide, if his act of burglary is intercepted, he knows he will be ostracized and condemned by society. With these risks in mind, however, Valjean tries to fulfill his Provider role through a daring criminal attempt. Later, after his apprehension and conviction, Hugo says Jean Valjean "raised his right hand and lowered it seven times, as if touching seven heads of unequal height, and from this gesture one could guess that whatever he had done had been to feed and clothe seven little children" (84-85). This heart wrenching justification of his attempt to provide stands in direct

contrast to the “trace of surliness” Valjean initially displays toward the Provider label, indicating Valjean has begun to see himself in terms of the label he once simply endured.

The criminal action which demonstrates Valjean’s internalization of the Provider label results in his being given a new label—Criminal. It is important to point out that Valjean’s identity is not Criminal when he commits the burglary. His action is what labeling theorist Edwin Lemert has identified as primary deviancy. It is unprecedented, not tied to the nature of the individual, and it results in a label of criminality that eventually comes to define the person, producing a lifestyle of criminality, or secondary deviancy (qtd. in Goode 59; qtd. in Siegel 241). Based on his primary deviancy of burglary, Valjean is labeled Criminal. Hugo reveals that “[a]t Toulon he was dressed in a red tunic. All his past life was erased, even his name. He was no longer Jean Valjean; he was Number 24,601” (85).

Because of his Criminal label, Valjean is treated as a criminal by the prison guards. His rights as a citizen are stripped away. Looking back on his treatment, Valjean recalls, ““Oh, the red tunic, the ball and chain, the plank to sleep on, the heat, the cold, the work gang, back to the prison ship every night, the lash, the double chain for nothing, solitary confinement for one word—even when sick in bed the chain” (76). His conditions are harsh, and the only message he receives from those in authority over him is that he is a criminal deserving of rejection. Based on his Criminal label, Valjean is stigmatized in prison to such an extent that Hugo says, “Never since infancy, since his mother, since his sister, never had he been greeted with a friendly word or a kind look” (89).

In response to being labeled and treated as Criminal, Valjean acknowledges that his action was criminal, and though he initially agrees to the justice of his treatment, he quickly

experiences a counter reaction. As he endures the treatment that goes along his new label,

Valjean

asked himself if he were the only one who had done wrong in the course of his disastrous story. If, in the first place, it was not a serious thing that he, a workman, could not have found work and he, and industrious man, should have been without bread. If, moreover, the fault committed and confessed, the punishment had not been cruel and excessive. If there were not a greater abuse on the part of the law, in the penalty, than there had been, on the part of the guilty, in the crime. If there were not too much weight on one side of the scales—on the side of the expiation. If the excess of the penalty were not a reversal of the situation, replacing the wrong of the delinquent with the wrong of the repression, to make a victim of the guilty, and a creditor of the debtor, and actually to put the right on the side of the one who had violated it. (88).

With this reasoning, Valjean rejects society's label and right to treat him in accordance with its label. Hugo makes it clear that Valjean could never have articulated these feelings at the time. He writes:

Was that state of mind that we have attempted to analyze as perfectly clear to Jean Valjean as we have tried to make it for our readers? [...] We dare not say so; in fact we do not believe it. [...] Jean Valjean was in the dark, suffering in the dark, hating the dark. He lived constantly in darkness, groping blindly, like a dreamer (90).

These quite concrete but incoherent feelings function at the level of instinct rather than reason, and they cause Valjean to reject the Criminal label in quite concrete but incoherent ways. Four

times he attempts to escape from prison, and these attempts cause his sentence to be lengthened from five years to nineteen years. Hugo explains:

Jean Valjean had repeated these attempts, so completely useless and foolish, when the opportunity arose, without a moment's thought of the outcome or of trials already gone. He escaped impetuously, like a wolf on seeing his cage door open. Instinct said, "Go!" Reason said, "Stay!" But before so mighty a temptation, reason disappeared, and only instinct remained. The beast alone was reacting. When he was recaptured, the new punishment inflicted on him only made him fiercer (91).

As adamant as Valjean's rejection the Criminal label is, his attempts to express his rejection through escape only serve to reinforce the idea that he is indeed Criminal, and consequently society continues to react to him on the basis of the Criminal label. The prison officials show their increased certainty that Valjean is Criminal by giving him a yellow passport which reads, "“Jean Valjean [...] has been in prison nineteen years; five years for burglary; fourteen years for four attempted escapes. This man is highly dangerous”" (74). It is unlikely that Valjean should be considered highly dangerous for breaking a window, stealing a loaf of bread which he drops in his escape, failing to discharge the weapon he brought to the scene, and being run to the ground and overpowered by a baker who was already disadvantaged in the chase by Valjean's head start. The conclusion that Valjean is highly dangerous must surely result from Valjean's unusual physical strength and his persistent refusal to submit to punishment as Criminal. Upon Valjean's release from prison, society steps in to fill the role the prison officials are relinquishing, and based on Valjean's passport, which communicates to them Valjean's label and the reinforcement prison officials have had of that label, society treats Valjean as Criminal.

Consequently, when Valjean tries to earn money honestly by working on the docks after being released from prison, he is unfairly refused half of his earnings, simply because he is an ex-convict. Similarly when he seeks food and shelter in and along the road to Digne, he is repeatedly refused because people see him as Criminal.

Eventually Valjean tires of his struggle against society's attempt to label him; he internalizes the Criminal label, accepting it as his inevitable identity. Valjean does not want to accept the label. He has successfully struggled against it for nineteen years. Though he hates society for what it has done to him and vows revenge upon it, his immediate response to release from prison is hope for an honest and peaceful life. Even on the night when Valjean yields to the label, he still struggles against it for some time. Hugo says:

He was in one of those times when our minds are agitated with ideas. There was a kind of ebb and flow in his brain. His oldest and most recent memories floated pell-mell and mingled confusedly, losing shape, swelling beyond measure, then abruptly disappearing as if in a muddy, troubled stream (97).

The memories flooding through his mind are not good ones. He has filling his mind the injustice of being punished for trying to provide for his family, the fury of "nineteen years of torment and slavery" (89), the frustration of the prison cheating him of his wages, the certainty that the dock supervisor did cheat him of wages, and the anger he feels at the innkeeper who would not serve him. Hugo says, Valjean's "mind wavered a whole long hour, in agitation and struggle" (98), but based on all of the messages from society that insist he is Criminal, he finally crumbles. He internalizes the label and steals the bishop's silver.

Just before Valjean internalizes the Criminal label, however, the bishop labels him Honest Man, a designation which stands in direct opposition to the label he has been resisting for

nineteen years. This label is of the sort that does not seem to have any basis in social expectation or personal action, aptitude, or attitude, for the bishop was aware of Valjean's Criminal label, and "[s]een by firelight, [Valjean] seemed a hideous, sinister apparition" (73) rather than an Honest Man. Despite what he sees, the bishop insists Valjean is Honest Man, and though the label is not given explicitly in the way that the Criminal label was, it is given just as unmistakably. When Valjean comes to the bishop's house seeking shelter, he fully expects the bishop to refuse him. Valjean is so surprised when the bishop does not refuse him that he tries to convince the bishop, by reading his passport aloud, that he should be thrown out. The bishop, however, ignores Valjean, stating clearly through his actions that Valjean is welcome. All of the other people Valjean has come into contact with since leaving prison have treated him badly or rejected him because he is Criminal. In Valjean's mind, then, the bishop's kindness and welcome would likely indicate his disbelief that Valjean is Criminal. The bishop's welcome appears to be an expression of trust, and one only trusts those believed to be honest. In this way, the bishop labels Valjean Honest Man.

After the initial welcome that signals Valjean's being labeled Honest Man, the bishop and those in his household proceed to treat Valjean in accordance with the label. The bishop consistently shows Valjean the respect due an Honest Man. He calls Valjean Monsieur and Hugo relates that "*Monsieur* to a convict is a glass of water to a man dying of thirst at sea. Ignominy thirsts for respect" (76). Additionally, the bishop acts as if Valjean were an Honest Man when he allows him to sleep without safeguards or precautions in his unlocked house with his belongings and with his sister and housekeeper. Readers familiar with the bishop know he trusts God to protect him and, to a great extent, his sisters from physical harm. Readers will further remember that the bishop is unconcerned about being robbed, believing that what God wills will happen.

Valjean does not know these things about the bishop, though. To him, the bishop's actions indicate trust in his honesty. Valjean tests this trust at one point, turning on the bishop and saying intimidatingly, "So, now! You let me stay in your house, as near to you as that! [...] Have you thought I might be a murderer?" (82), and the bishop indicates he might be trusting in God more than Valjean's honesty by saying "God will take care of that" (82). Valjean, however, is very unfamiliar with the Church, and he is unable to imagine a man treating him with such kindness and trust while at the same time believing he is Criminal. Consequently, the bishop's actions, when coupled with the thoughtfulness of the bishop's sister and the peaceful service of the bishop's housekeeper, reinforce Valjean's belief that he is trusted and seen as Honest Man.

One may wonder why Valjean internalizes the Criminal label when he is being told the by the priest that he is Honest Man. After all, one of symbolic interactionism's basic principles is that one can resist resist messages given by secondary social groups when receiving reinforcement of opposing messages from one's primary social group. Yet it would be a mistake to assume that the bishop and his household are, before Valjean's theft of the silver, a primary social group. Valjean has just met them. They are not strong enough, then, to cancel out the social pressure put on Valjean by the prison and general society, for the process whereby Valjean is labeled Criminal is much more advanced than the process whereby Valjean is labeled Honest Man. Consequently, Valjean briefly internalizes the Criminal label and steals the bishop's silver, and the effects of his being labeled Honest Man do not assume immediate visibility.

Though Valjean does not immediately respond to the Honest Man label, those around him persist in treating him in accordance with the label. The bishop insists to the police that Valjean is an honest man, even after Valjean steals his silver. He assures the police the silver is a

gift. Furthermore, based on the Honest Man label, the police release Valjean as though he were honest. The gendarmes say to him, ““You can go. Don’t you understand?”” (105).

In addition to the steady reinforcement the bishop provides for Valjean’s Honest Man label, the bishop also adds—the label of Good Man. ““Jean Valjean, my brother,”” he says, ““you no longer belong to evil, but to good. It is your soul I am buying for you. I withdraw it from dark thoughts and from the spirit of perdition, and I give it to God!”” (106). Good man is a step beyond honest man, for honest man implies that Valjean will not do wrong while good man implies that Valjean will, in addition to not doing wrong, also do good. Yet because the Good Man label directly proceeds from the Honest Man label and both labels are assigned by the same man, it is reasonable to understand the two not as separate labeling processes but rather as separate stages of the same labeling process.

Soon after the bishop attaches the Good Man label to Valjean, society’s continued reinforcement of the Criminal label comes into direct conflict with the reinforcement Valjean is receiving for the Good-Honest Man label. Consequently, Jean Valjean experiences an intense feeling of role conflict. He cannot be Good-Honest Man and Criminal at the same time, for the roles that correspond to the labels are mutually exclusive. In his turmoil over deciding which social group to which he should assign primary status, he subconsciously defaults to the group which has been influencing his thinking for the past nineteen years, and this default leads to his theft of Petit Gervais’s coin. His theft is not a rejection of the Good-Honest Man label but rather the result of the mental anguish brought on by conflicting labels. Hugo explains the situation this way:

In this frame of mind, he had met Petit Gervais and stolen his coin. Why? He certainly could not have explained it. Was it the final effect, the final effort of the

evil thought he had brought from prison, a remaining impulse, a result of what is called in physics “acquired force”? It was that, and perhaps it was also even less than that. To put it plainly, it was not he who had stolen, it was not the man, it was the beast that, from habit and instinct, had stupidly set its foot on that money, while the intellect was struggling in the midst of so many new and unknown influences (112).

Almost immediately after he steals Petit Gervais’s coin, Valjean settles the conflict within him. The bishop becomes his primary significant other, and “[w]hen the intellect awoke and saw this act of the brute [the theft of the coin], Jean Valjean recoiled in anguish and cried out in horror” (112).

It is at this point that Valjean responds to the reinforcement he has received for the Good-Honest Man label and determines reject the Criminal label in favor of taking on the function marked out by the Good-Honest Man label. Hugo reveals that “in stealing this money from the child, [Jean Valjean] had done a thing of which he was no longer capable” (112). This statement indicates Valjean’s rejection of the Criminal identity, but it does not signal, as it seems to suggest, his complete internalization of the Good-Honest Man label. Valjean recognizes that he has been labeled Good-Honest Man, and he wants that label to be an accurate description of who he is. He is only too aware, however, that he is not yet Good-Honest Man. Hugo says Valjean “could see his life, and it seemed horrible; his soul, and it seemed frightful” (113). Despite what he knows he is, Valjean responds to the reinforcement of the label with determination to make the label his identity, beginning immediately to behave in accordance with the label. He tries to return Petit Gervais’s coin. When he sets up a new life for himself, he bases that life on the principles of philanthropy and honesty. In the town in which he settles, he gives “more than a

million for the city and for the poor” (161). He pays teachers to educate poor children, equips hospitals to take care of the ill, and puts his very life in danger to rescue a man being crushed to death beneath a cart.

When Valjean moves into Montreuil-sur-mer, the people there, if they behave at all like the people of Digne, naturally assume Valjean is a Good-Honest Man since he comes without any other labels, and Valjean’s good deeds reinforce this opinion of him, thus coloring their interactions with him. Certainly not all of the people are willing to accept that Valjean is a Good-Honest Man from the beginning, even when they are given proof by his actions. Hugo says in reference to the high society gossips, “At first when he began to attract public attention, the good people would say, ‘This man is a man who wants to get rich.’ When they saw him enrich the country before himself, the same good people said, ‘He is ambitious.’” (161). Yet while the gossips remain suspicious for a long time, Hugo says that Valjean’s “workers and the children continued to call him ‘Father Madeline’” (162) after the wealthy gossips in town begin calling Valjean Monsieur Madeline. Father Madeline is the first name by which Valjean is known in Montreuil-sur-mer, and Hugo says “the poor owed him everything” (162). These things together indicate that the Valjean receives appreciation that leads to reinforcement of his Good-Honest Man label fairly near the beginning of his career in Montreuil-sur-mer. Such reinforcement of his Good-Honest Man label would inevitably encourage Valjean to persevere in his internalization of the label, but from his performance in regards to the Criminal label, it is clear that Valjean is strong enough to hold on to his identity for many years in the face of social disapproval. In any case, Hugo says that eventually, Valjean “was so effective that everyone finally had to respect him, and so kind that no one could help loving him” (162). The social reinforcement Valjean

receives from the people around him is seen most clearly in regards to the king's appointment of mayor. Hugo says:

In 1820, five years after his arrival at Montreuil-sur-mer, the services he had rendered the region were so spectacular, and the wishes of the whole population so unanimous, that the king again appointed him mayor of the city. He refused again, but the prefect resisted his determination, the principal citizens came and urged him to accept, and the people in the streets begged him to do so; the insistence was so strong that at last he yielded (163).

Valjean, therefore, receives much social reinforcement for his Good-Honest Man label.

Based on this reinforcement, Valjean is, at some point during the eight year span between his decision to function as a Good-Honest Man and his decision to sacrifice himself for Champmathieu, able to fully internalize the Good-Honest Man label. That he has progressed to see his core identity as matching the label becomes clear through observing the debate he has with himself before going to Arras. Feeling bad for even considering allowing Champmathieu to take his punishment, Valjean mocks his former consciousness of himself as “the great one, the true one” (226). Additionally he demonstrates a view of himself that separates the present “Mayor Madeleine with all his virtues” from the past “convict Jean Valjean” (227). Valjean's use of “the true one” as a designator for himself indicates that he sees himself as Honest Man, and his connection of himself to virtue indicates that he sees himself as Good Man. Clearly, then, he has internalized the Good-Honest Man label.

One indication of the level to which Valjean internalizes this label may be seen by his ability to successfully resist internalizing the Criminal reassigned him after the Champmathieu affair. During that incident, Valjean acts in accordance with his Good-Honest Man label,

admitting that he is Jean Valjean when an other man is about to be sentenced to prison in his place. Many of those around him overlook the goodness and honesty of his action, attempting to redefine him in terms of criminality. Hugo reveals that “[i]n less than two hours, all the good he had done was forgotten, and he was ‘nothing but a convict’” (295). Inspector Javert probably best expresses the attempt to relabel Valjean in his outburst to Fantine. He says, “‘I tell you there is no Monsieur Madeline, and that there is no Monsieur the Mayor. There’s a thief, a bandit, a convict named Jean Valjean’” (293).

Despite these attempts to relabel him Criminal, with the help of his significant others, Jean Valjean rejects the Criminal label. The first bit of reinforcement he receives for his Good-Honest Man identity comes at the moment of his confession in court. Upon Valjean’s insistence that he is a convict, the judge makes the immediate assumption that Valjean has become insane. Although the judge is not connected personally to Valjean, his position of authority casts him, to some extent, into the role of a significant other. More important than the judge’s reinforcement, however, is that of Sister Simplicie. She is legendary for her goodness and honesty. It is known to all that she “‘had never lied in her life’” (298-99). She is so convinced, however, that Jean Valjean is a Good-Honest Man being unjustly pursued by the police that she who had chosen to emulate Simplicie of Sicily, a “‘saint who preferred to have both her breasts torn off rather than answer [...] a lie that would have saved her’” (214) told not one but “[t]wo lies in succession, one upon another, without hesitation, quickly, as if she were adept at it” (299). Her persistent belief that Valjean is a Good-Honest Man, when coupled with the persistent belief of Valjean’s concierge, who also lies to the police in an effort to protect him from capture, undoubtedly gives Valjean strength to resist the Criminal label and embrace the Good-Honest Man identity.

Jean Valjean remains a Good-Honest Man for the remainder of the novel, adding the identity of Father to his Good-Honest Man label soon after his escape from prison. Curiously enough, however, Valjean does not assume this additional facet of identity through the labeling process. Hugo portrays Valjean's love for Cosette and his subsequent assumption of the responsibilities of fatherhood as occurring instantaneously. He says:

Cosette's instinct sought a father, as Jean Valjean's instinct sought a child. To meet was to find one another. In that mysterious moment when their hands touched, they were welded together. When their two souls saw each other, they recognized mutual need, and they embraced (437).

This puzzling inconsistency in regards to Valjean's evolution of identity may simply result from the reality that no sociological theory is meant to describe every part of a person. An amended version of Lawrence Porter's suggestion that "the plot of Hugo's [...] novel focuses on the redemption [...] of Jean Valjean" from the dehumanizing power of social circumstance through receiving and giving love may offer another explanation for Hugo's deviation from the labeling model in the last stage of Valjean's identity evolution (128). Perhaps, on an intentional and unintentional level, Hugo is demonstrating his belief that with the tool of love, individuals can defeat society's power to socially construct individuals. Regardless of the reason for Hugo's shift in character depiction though, the theme Hugo represents through Valjean's Provider, Criminal, and Good-Honest Man labels is unmistakable.

With his portrayal of Valjean's acceptance of these labels, Hugo provides readers with an illustration of just how powerful society's role is in shaping the individual. Jean Valjean is a titanic figure, yet never is he able to indefinitely stand against social labeling by himself. He is ruined by society and saved by society, and when he does successfully resist the labels that part

of society assign to him, he is only able to do so with the help he gets from another, more powerful, part of society. Consequently, while Hugo may not have intentionally created this particular illustration of society's power over the individual, such a reading nicely supplements what Hugo expressly states within the text of his novel. He says that "the savage outlines" who make up the degenerate part of the lower class "have two mothers, both stepmothers, ignorance and misery" (Hugo 720). Hugo understood the power society has to shape the individual, and with the help of labeling theory, it becomes clear that Hugo knew more about how society constructs the individual than perhaps even he realized. By applying labeling theory to *Les Misérables*, readers are given the chance to see the things Hugo inherently knew about his protagonist and society, but had not consciously considered.

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